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## Research report

# Is eating science or common sense? Knowledge about “natural foods” among self-identified “natural food” consumers, vendors and producers in rural and urban Mexico

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To explore the common sense knowledge that consumers, vendors and producers hold of “natural foods”. The focus was on common knowledge because this is infrequently explored in social psychology where most studies focus on the implementation of scientific knowledge. The focus was on natural foods because the naturalness of foods seems to be one of the particular concerns that current consumers have about today’s food market and because a specific natural food preference was observed in the contexts of study. **Method:** Fifty-seven informants in a rural context and 58 informants in an urban context participated in either a free association study or an interview study. Data content were analyzed. **Results:** In the urban context natural foods obtain their significance in the relationship between food and the self-concept; eating natural (or good) food is a task that requires effort and attitude, and foods obtain a moral value. In the rural context natural foods obtain their significance as an expression of a social and cultural system of interdependence that establishes practices and customs that have a long history in the community. **Conclusions:** It is suggested that these common knowledge systems are related to practical challenges that are particular to the informants’ context and that the structure of their common sense knowledge systems depend on the mediation of the flow of scientific knowledge and technological knowledge in each context.

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## Introduction

The objective of the current study was to explore the systems of common sense knowledge<sup>1</sup> about “natural foods” among consumers, vendors and producers of these foods: Whereas the influence of scientific knowledge on healthy eating has been an important focus of social psychological investigations (e.g. [Conner & Armitage, 2002](#); [Gracia-Arnaiz, 2007](#); [Saunders & Rahilly, 1990](#)), little attention has been focused so far on the common sense knowledge that influences how consumers make sense of their particular dietary practices.

The specific focus on *natural* food – as opposed to, for example, *healthy food* – was chosen after an initial exploration in the two con-

texts of study (see below): While setting up a study to explore common sense elaborations of healthy eating it was noted that consumers expressed a particular preference for what they called natural foods. A clear and uncontroversial definition of natural food was never given by those who spoke to the researcher. However, it became clear that it constitutes an important and meaningful object to them, worthy of further exploration.

The lack of a clear definition of natural foods is not limited to the current contexts of study: Foods that are labeled as “natural” have obtained a more important presence in the global food market. This is illustrated by the fact that 25% of the new food products introduced globally in 2008 were labeled as “natural” (natural product introduction, 2009). Despite this, there are no legal definitions and evaluation criteria for natural foods, as there are for organic foods for example. In the social scientific literature and in journalistic works, food related social issues are described that potentially give natural foods the meaning they have for common consumers: A first issue related to consumers’ concern about the naturalness of their food is the rejection of the industrialization of the food market and

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E-mail address: [anneke.kooijmans@gmail.com](mailto:anneke.kooijmans@gmail.com) (A. Kooijmans).<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter the words common sense knowledge, common knowledge, social knowledge and common sense elaborations are used interchangeably.

of the decreasing social bonds associated with industrialization in general. These decreasing social bonds were one of the main concerns of the initial “natural food movement” of the 1960s (Ikerd, undated publication). Secondly, the current global and industrialized food market (Goody, 2002; Huotilainen, 2005; Schmidhuber, 2005) has been blamed for outbreaks of epidemics and bacterial infections and has led to a general concern about food security associated with unnatural foods (Kenner, 2008). Thirdly, moral concerns about the treatment of animals and workers in the conventional, industrialized food market could be argued to be associated with the concern about the naturalness of food (Geyrhalter, 2005). And lastly, social identity factors have been argued to be associated with the differentiation between natural and unnatural foods. According to this argument natural foods offer a new way to distinguish between the upper and lower social classes: Those with economic and educational resources can illustrate this by buying more expensive (natural) foods and expressing a consciousness about healthy eating (Johnston, 2008). In this study we benefit from the lack of a clear (legal) definition of natural food: this lack of clarity allows us to look at the common sense elaborations that define the object, that give it its clarity for consumers.

The current study was conducted in an urban setting with informants from a high socio-economic class and in a rural setting with participants from a socio-economic lower middle class. The study was conducted in these two particular contexts for the following reasons: First, even though informants in these contexts share a preference for a certain dietary style they identify as “natural eating”, their particular food environments and actual dietary practices are distinct. This allowed for an attempt to understand the factors that influence how consumers who seem to share a particular food preference or concern come to their different specific understanding of what it entails. Second, the flow of food related information is different for the modern, urbanized informants as compared with the more traditional rural informants. The informants differ in their exposure to scientific knowledge about food and eating, to knowledge about agriculture, food industry, food technology etcetera. This creates an opportunity to explore the influence of these different contexts of knowledge on the meaning that is attributed to natural foods.

This study focused on common sense knowledge about food – knowledge that is not necessarily correct from a scientific point of view and that might not be inspired by official scientific knowledge. The specific focus on common sense knowledge was chosen because social psychological investigations of food and eating tend to focus on the implementation of scientific knowledge about food and eating on the part of the common consumer. Common sense knowledge, even though it might have large implications for daily eating, tends to be considered as biased; as a potential deviation from the dietary guidelines that science prescribes:

#### Limitations of current models of individual food choice

Examples of this approach can be found in application of rational decision making models as predictors of eating behavior. These studies take scientific knowledge about healthy eating as a starting point and ultimately aim to predict and explain under what circumstances a consumer will eat a diet that science has defined as healthy (e.g. Conner & Armitage, 2002). The *theory of planned behavior* (TPB) is an example of a rational decision making model that is frequently applied to the study of food choice. TPB models three cognitive factors as the main predictors of behavioral intentions which in turn are a predictor of actual behavior. Attitudes form the first of these cognitive factors. In the case of food studies, these attitudes would be the general, positive or negative evaluation of eating a healthy diet. Subjective norms form the second of these cognitive factors. They refer to the perception of social pressures to eat

or not to eat a healthy diet. Perceived behavioral control, the perception of the control one has over eating this healthy diet, forms the last cognitive factor in TPB (Ajzen, 1988, 1991). Even though TPB is a general decision making model that can be used to study any kind of decision making process, in the study of food and eating, the model has been used to study those specific behaviors that science prescribes as healthy eating behavior: It has been used to predict the intention to “eat healthy” in women who attended an ante- and post-natal clinic (Anderson & Shepherd, 1989), to predict the intention to reduce the consumption of fatty food and the intention to increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables (Cox, Anderson, Lean, & Mela, 1998; Nguyen, Otis, & Potvin, 1996). TPB has been used to predict the intention of students who were either health majors or non-health majors to eat less fat and sugar (Saunders & Rahilly, 1990). In this study it was found that taking the sample as a whole, both attitudes and subjective norms were predictive of behavioral intentions. However, when dividing the sample according to major, attitudes were the dominant predictors for the intention of health majors whereas subjective norms were the dominant predictors of non health majors. It was suggested that health majors were more *knowledgeable* about the effects of eating fat and sugar and that therefore their food choices were less open to the influence of social pressures. This illustrates the underlying knowledge assumption: that an increase in scientific knowledge in consumers is associated with an increase in the desirable behavior.

There is nothing wrong with studying the circumstances under which consumers will make healthy food choices. Quite the contrary. Despite this, it is debatable whether the scientific discourse about nutrition can actually be projected on common consumers; whether these descriptions are appropriate to capture the specific social characteristics that food and eating has in the daily lives of lay consumers (Wagner et al., 1999). That is, do we eat as scientists or as lay people? And is eating science or common sense?

#### Common sense knowledge

Common sense knowledge can be defined as the opposite of complex, organized knowledge. It is spontaneous knowledge that is derived from direct experiences and has a practical purpose (Wagner, Hayes, & Flores, 2011). Whereas scientists are considered to approach their problem as outsiders, the common knower is directly affected by the knowledge he has and therefore common knowing is not independent. It depends on the specific and concrete contextual challenges that people face in their daily lives. It is used to act and to adapt oneself to one’s daily circumstances.

These daily circumstances are related to the concept of *context of knowledge*. This concept describes how different sorts of public spheres or social contexts<sup>2</sup> are associated with different types of common knowledge. Building on the theoretical differences between Durkheim’s collective representations and Moscovici’s social representations, Jovchelovitch (2001, 2007) differentiates between traditional and detraditionalized social spheres and describes and illustrates how these types of social spheres are associated with different kinds of common knowledge. In the traditional social sphere common knowledge tends to be more stable, resistant to change, and tends to reflect the primary concern with social bonds. That is, common knowledge in traditional social spheres tends to be less concerned with describing “how things actually are” and is more concerned with emphasizing and strengthening the social bonds by emphasizing the particular norms, values and world views of

<sup>2</sup> The terms social context, information context, context of knowledge, social sphere and public sphere are used interchangeably in this article.

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